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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether a standards-based portfolio experience could exist harmoniously within a teacher education program that supports constructivism. Student and faculty interviews were conducted over a 2-year period with the results being used for continuous improvement of the portfolio assessment. The portfolio assessment uses principles of the Interstate New Teachers' Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). Over the study period, researchers conducted 347 portfolio reviews. Data also include surveys completed by 25 students in fall 2000 and 27 in spring 2001. Findings support the use of the portfolio process. Faculty have agreed that the holistic evaluation of student portfolios is consistent with constructivist beliefs. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Does this fit?
INTASC-based portfolios in a constructivist program

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Abstract

This research studies whether a standards-based portfolio experience can exist harmoniously within a teacher education program that supports constructivism. Student and faculty interviews were conducted over a 2-year period with the results being used to continually improve the process of portfolio assessment that uses the INTASC principles to guide portfolio selections.

Does this fit? INTASC-based portfolios in a constructivist program

Over the past decade, numerous colleges of teacher education have either chosen to validate teacher certification requirements through a portfolio process that requires candidates to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions as set forth by the teacher preparation college (Biddle & Lasley, 1991; Borko, Michalec, Timmons & Siddle, 1997; Cole, Messner, Swonigan & Tillman, 1991; Rafferty, 1994) or by NBPTS (Berg & Curry, 1997; Tierney, 1993; Weiss & Weiss, 1998, or by the INTASC principles (Alban, Proffit & SySantos, 1998; Dutt-Doner & Personett, 1997; Rearick, 1997). In some states such as North Carolina, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Florida, to name a few, portfolio demonstrations of having met board-certifying standards have been mandated (Bradshaw & Hawk, 1996; Stroble, 1992). With so much focus on standardizing portfolio expectations, guidelines, and evaluative criteria, we, along with others (Arter, Spandel & Culham, 1995; Blackwell, 1997; Rearick, 1997; Niles & Bruneau, 1994) wondered if standardized portfolio expectations fit within a program that supports a constructivist philosophy.

The University of North Dakota's teacher education program, over a century old, has a philosophy of education marked by a Deweyan perspective of learner-centered pedagogy and constructivist beliefs about the nature of learning. Since 1988, our education department has conducted portfolio reviews as an authentic, alternative assessment of teacher education candidates in lieu of standardized national teacher

exams.

Our impressions of preservice teacher portfolios, accumulated since 1994, were mainly positive (Zidon, 1996). We felt that personal and professional growth and readiness for teaching were demonstrated by the preservice teachers. There were, however, several issues that continuously cropped up each semester: (1) Some important educational topics were often missing-mainly, diversity, professional growth and commitment to continued development, and awareness of parental/community connections; (2) Inability of many preservice teachers to analyze and see in the portfolio artifacts what was clearly apparent to faculty; (3) An array of slipshod, inadequate portfolios (rare) to slick, ponderously thick portfolios (common); (4) More focus by preservice teachers on a collection as opposed to a selection of a few representative pieces to demonstrate their work; and (5) Reflection was often a hit and miss affair.

When we came across the book Portfolio and performance assessment in teacher education (Campbell, Melenyzer, Nettles, and Wyman, 2000) two years ago, we felt we had found something very helpful in addressing our concerns. Campbell et al., at California University of Pennsylvania, used the INTASC Principles to structure portfolio expectations. After extended study and preparation, we followed their lead.

In planning the expectations, guidelines, and portfolio review procedures, we discussed whether requiring preservice teachers to adhere to standards for the determination of portfolio selections fit our constructivist beliefs about learning. What meaning would students make of a more standardized approach? Would their portfolios

become standardized in looks and selections? Would individual growth, expression, and insights into the personal be sacrificed? Would faculty support using the INTASC principles to structure portfolio expectations when they were accustomed to more open processes?

At NRMERA 2001, we described how we structured and explained this new portfolio process, first to faculty and then to preservice teachers (Greves & Zidon, 2001). During this year's presentation, we report on both student and faculty perspectives in regards to using standards-based guidelines in the organization of the portfolio and for selection of artifacts. While this report focuses on the first and second years of data collection regarding our initial questions, we want to point out that we find ourselves scrambling to stay afloat an increasingly expansive sea of further questions. Still, the overriding issue through implementing and researching this process is whether standardized portfolio expectations can not only exist within a constructivist program, but can enrich and support the development of future teachers in such a program.

Data and Research Methodology

Since fall semester 2000, we have conducted 347 portfolio reviews in our secondary program; this number includes all three phases (Phase I:166 reviews; Phase II:76 reviews, and Phase III: 105 reviews) that preservice students experience. Most of the data includes student and faculty interviews conducted after the Phase I reviews ; we are now just beginning to collect interview data after students' Phase II and Phase III reviews.

Data for this research also includes surveys completed by 25 of 42 students during fall semester 2000 and 27 of 36 students during spring semester 2001, or 67% combined, right after completion of their Phase I reviews. Seventeen students of 42, from fall 2000 semester, volunteered to be interviewed to elicit their impressions of benefits of portfolio assessment generally, and secondly, to gain their impressions on portfolio assessment based on demonstrations of meeting the INTASC principles, specially regarding their perspectives regarding challenges and drawbacks, and their perspectives of how the process could be improved. Ten of 10 faculty members consented to be interviewed after the first Phase I portfolio review of December 2000. Informal data from faculty conversations regarding the portfolio, assignments made for courses, student comments during various classes were also noted and influenced us as we analyzed the more explicit data set.

Following a qualitative research methodology of data analysis, we separately coded and categorized student and faculty interviews and the aggregated comments from student surveys. After we had each defined some working categories, we compared notes before we, again independently, reflected upon emergent themes. Findings related to our research questions revolved around the following themes: Desperate Hours, Awakenings, Student Issues, and Faculty Issues. The Conclusions section of our paper addresses those themes as well as the research question regarding use of standards-based approach within a constructivism-based school of education.

Findings

Desperate Hours. Confusion and uncertainty characterized preservice students' reactions to hearing about the portfolio expectations. As faculty, we had noted similar responses, since 1988, whenever we introduced to the portfolio expectations for the first time. Just as Wade and Yarbrough (1996) said that "discomfort is normal" in the introductory phase of portfolio assessment (p. 78), we also knew that student anxiety is high at this point and is a "given." One new source of confusion, however, was having to make sense of the wording of the INTASC principles. Students also spoke of "forcing a fit," the uncertainty of how to write cover sheets that included, for each artifact, a description, rationale for selection against the standard, and self-evaluation of their performance against standards.

An intimidating event to many-compiling a portfolio and dealing with the ambiguities of having to select, on their own, artifacts to match standards, along with time constraints of college course papers, tests, jobs, children, and social events-students procrastinated until finally, and desperately, they had to do it. Some students wondered if the faculty's ulterior motive was to weed out less-determined candidates.

Awakenings. Comments that included, "Ideas change....things relate...my beliefs were confirmed...I was forced to think...this validates my choice of a teaching career...I see the holes...I know the expectations" showed that the portfolio serves to make students aware of many things. The purpose of the portfolio, some said, was

eventually to be used to get a job. Others felt that it showed them gaps that they hoped to address during their continued professional preparation, and yet others said that they saw the value of portfolio interview experience with two other students and two or three faculty: "The review was the best part...the questions were relevant and challenging...got me to think." Hearing peers' remarks and responding to questions and prompts from the faculty, and being mentored at times in regards to their responses created an safe environment for colloquium that supported and nourished these early stages of professional growth. Compiling the portfolio affirmed to the students that they had learned and had made the right choice. Before the interview, students confessed that they were "scared...nervous...intimidated," emotions that yielded to ones of confidence and pride during and after the interview.

Faculty admitted, after the first interview using this newly structured portfolio review with students, that they were "surprised...really impressed" at how well students had constructed their portfolios in relationship to INTASC principles but also at how "well prepared and thoughtful....articulate...respectful of their peers" students were.

As positive as the experience was everyone, both students and faculty had concerns.

Student Concerns. Time to assemble the portfolio and wondering all the while if "this is what the faculty want" were issues that students voiced. Some were concerned about the public nature of the portfolio while others felt that the portfolio alone could not represent their personality; however, these students felt that the interview did serve this

purpose. And a few students briefly made mention of being “confined” by having to match artifacts to standards, wondering whether everyone’s portfolio would lose some individuality. One other concern was in regards to the expectation to include best work; the preservice teachers felt that their best learning had sometimes come from poor work.

Faculty Concerns. It is not hyperbolic to say that faculty have been “really impressed” with the quality of students’ portfolios and their interview responses. They felt these resulted from clear expectations and the guidelines that INTASC provides. They did say that potential concerns included “standardization and loss of individuality... and students wanting to please through application of colorful, “snazzy” stationery. Another major concern, as portfolio assessment takes considerably more time than promotion to certification through course completion, is in regard to those faculty who are less invested and less willing to share the responsibility and workload.

Conclusions and Discussion

Dewey (1938) wrote that organizing learning in a progressive way includes both structure and freedom:

When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority will be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority... basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and intimate contacts between the mature and the immature... and consequently, more, rather than less, guidance by others. The problem, then, is: how these

contacts can be established without violating the principle of learning through personal experience” (p. 21).

Progressive pedagogy and constructivism do not infer abdication of structure and guidance nor a *laissez faire* policy. Arter et al. (1995) wrote that the use of portfolio does not reap automatic benefits, that “these have to be built into the portfolio system” (p. 2). Wade and Yarborough (1996) said that “guided support” and “instructor effects may be substantial” (p. 78). Scaffolding students towards independence is an important aspect of portfolio assessment (Niles & Bruneau, 1994). The worthiness of portfolio assessment is dependent on many factors related to purpose, expectations, guidelines, and how they are used by teacher education students and viewed by faculty. And use of INTASC principles provides preservice teachers with a vision of what it is that they are working towards. Blackwell writes, “There is no quibbling with these [INTASC] standards. They represent the best of what we know scientifically about what teachers should know and be able to do” (p. 4). Standards-based portfolio assessment, however, carries the potential for becoming yet another ill-fated education reform effort unless faculty guard against a “prescriptive procedure...rather than an intellectual process” (Biddle & Lasley, 1991, p. 14). Quality over quantity (Rafferty, 1994) and “systematic reflection on work and goal setting” (Arter et al., 1995, p. 2) are central to the success of portfolio assessment.

In 2002, our Teaching & Learning department adopted the INTASC principles as the goals of the program and also as the framing principles for preservice teacher

education students' portfolios. A few faculty have felt that applying some numerical value to students' portfolios and various components of the portfolio contents would be an improvement over more descriptive ratings. After extensive discussion, faculty agreed that a holistic evaluation of portfolios was more consistent with our constructivist beliefs about learners and learning. Our NCATE report (2001) contains the following explanation of our philosophy in regards to this concern:

Wholistic assessment is preferred over assigning numerical values to discrete aspects of the portfolio reviews. It is felt that the latter imposes a reductionist approach to a process that is an integrated, cohesive assessment plan, something that is important for the candidate's professional growth and development.

Applying quantitative criteria to an process that is essentially qualitative and in many aspects anthropological, is counterproductive and is to be avoided. The faculty feel strongly that it should not be the case that we "let the tail of psychometrics wag our work" (Shulman, 1998). Moreover, holistic scoring is much more attuned to the departmental mission. As reported in Cole (1992), "Wolf suggests, '...a portfolio is more coherent and informative when evaluated wholistically. This approach depends heavily on 'professional judgement,' a critical component of evaluation in any profession" (p. 20). Additionally, Cole (1992) supports "...an assessment avenue based on supported judgements about specific aspects of the problem being evaluated without reducing the judgement task to scientific formula" (p. 20).

A final caveat about the use of standards in portfolio construction is that teaching carries moral imperatives that can easily be overlooked if portfolios are standardized, which is different than making selections that demonstrate standards. "Standards help us codify what we expect. But they cannot do the work for us: (Blackwell, 1997, p. 9). Eisner (1985) presents three aspects to his explanation of educational criticism, i.e., descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative, that is consonant with good portfolio assessment. Nothing in education is ever the "answer"; however, organizing the preservice teacher education student's experience around basic underlying principles clearly is beneficial to professional growth and development. One faculty summed it up this way, "Portfolio process helps you learn how to evaluate, assess, and reflect upon what it is you've done. And that's something that we're teaching."

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